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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002061

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/08/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#) [OSCE](#)

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM - A WEAK LINK IN TURKISH REFORM

REF: A. ANKARA 1935

[1](#)B. ANKARA 1511

[1](#)C. ANKARA 814

[1](#)D. 04 ANKARA 6871

(U) Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Turks cite history to argue that Turkey is a model of religious tolerance. They assert that the existence of diverse religious communities in the Ottoman Empire and the acceptance of the Jews who migrated to Istanbul after expulsion from Spain in 1492 proves Turkey is free of religious discrimination. However, from its founding until today the Republic of Turkey has encouraged emigration of "non-Muslims," principally Christians, through discriminatory taxes and other policies, including the fomented Istanbul riots of 1955 and pressures on Syrians in the southeast. Very few Christians and Jews remain in Turkey. Discrimination or other pressure continues against Alevis and others not in the Hanafi Sunni mainstream as well. EU contacts say GOT failure to allow more freedom for religious minorities could eventually derail Turkey's EU candidacy. End Summary.

Image of Religious Tolerance a Myth

[1](#)2. (C) If you raise concerns about religious freedom in Turkey, the response will almost always be a kind of bemused denial. The vast majority of Turks -- government officials, journalists, academics, politicians, and people on the street -- believe that their country is a model of religious tolerance. In school they are taught a mythic version of Ottoman and Turkish history, focusing on the presence of various, sizable religious communities in the Ottoman Empire. They claim with pride that their history is free of the kind of bloody religious conflict that wracked Europe for centuries (Turkish students are not exposed to a serious analysis of the massacres of Armenians and Alevis or pressure against the Syrians).

[1](#)3. (C) A prime example of this distorted, backward-looking perspective is the way Turks constantly refer to the Jews who fled Spain for Istanbul in 1492. Turks cite this historical reference to reject the idea that religious minorities face discrimination in Turkey today. For example, Mustafa Sait Yazicioglu, an MP from the ruling AK Party (AKP) and former president of the GOT's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), recently cited the events of 1492 in a meeting with us as evidence that the Diyanet's current campaign against missionaries (reftels A-C) does not reflect hostility toward other religions.

[1](#)4. (C) It is true that Jews were forced out of Spain and taken in by the Ottomans. It is also true that the Ottoman authorities did not massacre them, drive them from their homes, or otherwise persecute them as European powers had done. But the Ottomans treated Jews (and Christians) as second-class subjects, and today, more than 500 years later, the Republic of Turkey is doing the same. Jews, like Christians and other religious minorities, are in practice barred from careers in key State institutions such as the armed forces, the MFA, law enforcement, the judiciary, and the National Intelligence Organization. There are no "non-Muslims" in the 550-seat Parliament.

[1](#)5. (C) The popular image of a tolerant, religiously diverse Turkey contrasts sharply with present-day reality. While millions of Christians lived in the Ottoman Empire, few are left today. The Armenian Orthodox comprise the largest Christian community, with approximately 65,000, followed by the 15,000-strong Syrian Orthodox (Syriac) community. The once large Greek Orthodox population is now estimated at less than 2,000. There are also approximately 25,000 Jews, 3,000 Protestants and small numbers of other religious minorities. The overall national population is officially 99 percent Sunni Muslim. However, this figure is inflated by the GOT's refusal to recognize the Alevis, estimated to number 5-8 million, as a distinct religious group, or to take account of the fact that a significant proportion of the nominally Muslim population does not actively practice its religion.

16. (C) The winnowing out of religious minorities did not happen by accident. Since its founding in 1923, the Republic of Turkey has utilized a series of policies to encourage emigration of religious minorities, principally of Christians. In 1940, for example, the GOT imposed a wealth tax on Christian and Jewish citizens at a rate up to 10 times greater than the rate used for Muslims, a policy that historian Bernard Lewis referred to as a "tax pogrom." This type of approach continues in many forms, including the State's relentless expropriation of properties owned by "non-Muslim" foundations, and the above-mentioned Diyanet campaign to define missionaries as a threat to national unity.

17. (C) Nevertheless, the myth of religious pluralism persists, fed by the inability of Turks to recognize how far removed they are from the Western concept of religious freedom. FM Gul recently denied the existence of religious prejudice in Turkey by asserting that, "Turkey is a place where churches and synagogues are built near mosques." In fact, Turkey has many historic churches lying in ruins where there are no longer enough Christians to form a congregation. The State bureaucracy places great hurdles in front of "non-Muslims" seeking to restore historic properties or open new places of worship where there is a demand. The Ecumenical Patriarchate's Halki seminary remains closed.

18. (C) Christians tend to draw the most suspicion and hostility from the Turkish State, which remains mindful that Christians long preceded Turkic peoples in Anatolia. The Turkish State also resents Christians' insistence on vigorously pursuing judicial redress, e.g., on restitution of confiscated property. The Ecumenical Patriarchate predates the Ottoman Empire, and its representatives do not hesitate to assert historical rights. Muslim Turks also harbor suspicions about Christians since they associate Christians with the Crusades, the Russian invasions of eastern Anatolia in the late 19th century and 1915, and the European powers that defeated the Ottomans in World War I and aimed to carve up Anatolia.

19. (C) Jews, by contrast, face far less official ire. The Jewish community is still grateful to the Turks for taking in their ancestors 500 years ago. In private, Turkish Jews will acknowledge to us concerns about official discrimination. But they almost never raise such concerns in public. When they have a problem, they try to resolve it quietly through channels. If that fails, they accept it. As Ankara University professor Baskin Oran put it to us, "After 500 years the Jews still see themselves as guests here, and if you're a guest you don't make trouble."

Religious Freedom a Sleeper Issue for EU

10. (C) In some small, symbolic ways, EU-related legal reforms have caused a slight easing of conditions for religious minorities. However, the overall impact remains limited and Turkey's EU accession drive has highlighted the country's shortcomings as never before. The European Commission, in its progress reports on Turkey, has consistently cited religious freedom as a weak area in the GOT reform effort, and the European Parliament has repeatedly called for greater efforts. However, EU member states generally appear reluctant to raise the issue directly.

11. (C) Our EU contacts say it is difficult for member states to criticize the GOT's approach to religion because the EU cannot speak with one voice -- practices among EU states vary significantly. However, they say religious freedom is a sleeper issue that could derail Turkey's candidacy if the GOT continues to avoid reform. "If they keep ignoring it, sooner or later it will be a problem for the EU," said a Dutch diplomat. There are signs of EU concern in the EU's reaction to the anti-missionary campaign. Sema Kilicer, political officer at the European Commission's Turkey Representation, told us Enlargement Commissioner Rehn raised the missionary issue with PM Erdogan in Brussels, and Ambassador Kretschmer, head of the Turkey Representation, discussed it with FM Gul. A German diplomat told us church leaders in Germany are increasingly concerned about the plight of Christians in Turkey, and the German Government is taking heed. Noting that there are 3,000 mosques in Germany, he said German officials are "fed up" with the hypocrisy of PM Erdogan and other GOT leaders who ignore the rights of "non-Muslims" while criticizing the EU as a "Christian club."

12. (C) A Danish contact averred to us that religious freedom is the most difficult challenge for Turkey in its EU reform drive. If change comes, he believes, it will come slowly, spread over the 10 years or so it would take for Turkey to

complete the accession process. Others, however, are starting to question whether the GOT will ever accept religious pluralism. They believe religious freedom may define the limit of the AKP's capacity for reform, and there do not appear to be any parties among the opposition willing to pursue the issue. "Maybe we expected too much of (AKP)," said Kilicer. "They passed some reforms, but it seems they cannot do more. Now what will happen?"

Comment

13. (C) Ersonmez Yarbay, a pious but iconoclastic AK MP, told us the Turkish State at its founding made a terrible mistake by turning Turkey into a one-religion society. Islam in Turkey, he believes, would be strengthened by competition. Imams would have to make greater efforts to teach Islam if other religions were given free rein. There might be slightly fewer Muslims, but their faith would be truer. Moreover, if Turkey had retained its once large Christian community it would today be more advanced and closer to the West. It might have even won a Nobel prize or two by now, he said.

14. (C) He is right, of course, but he is almost alone. Reform rhetoric aside, the truth is that religious pluralism is opposed across the Turkish political spectrum. Islamists fear the influence of Western religions, particularly Evangelical Christianity. For nationalists, religious diversity -- like ethnic or linguistic diversity -- is a threat to national unity. The general public is easily led astray by nationalist-religious rhetoric. The Diyanet's anti-missionary campaign, which has been strongly supported at the Cabinet level, indicates that AKP is not about to challenge the status quo.

15. (C) In his book "The Emergence of Modern Turkey," Bernard Lewis writes of the 19th century Ottoman reform efforts aimed at winning European support for the Empire. According to Lewis, the most shocking element of the reforms for Ottoman Muslims was the stated principle that subjects of all religions would be equal under the law. Under both the traditions of Islam and the policies of the Ottoman Empire, "non-Muslim" subjects were to be "tolerated". However, this toleration "was predicated on the assumption that the tolerated communities were separate and inferior, and were moreover clearly marked as such," Lewis wrote. For the European powers, the Ottomans' treatment of "non-Muslims" was "the touchstone of Turkish sincerity," according to Lewis. At the time, the Europeans often found Turkish sincerity wanting in the field of religious freedom. The EU will likely reach the same conclusion unless the Turkish State, government, and society develop a new, truly tolerant approach to religious minorities.

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